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ABSTRACT

This paper gives an overview of activities related to access to information about women that have been undertaken by librarians and other information professionals worldwide over the past decade. The first section addresses access issues, including bias in traditional cataloging/classification practices and controlled vocabularies. The second section discusses women's information in libraries, including examples of the variety of libraries, documentation centers, and archives worldwide that are the best resources for women's information. The third section considers collection development issues, including the difficulty of collecting materials from small presses and the lack of women's studies specialists in libraries. The fourth section covers women's studies librarianship. The fifth section summarizes progress and prospects, including a 1998 conference hosted by the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement and an online guide to collections of women's information. Includes a directory of relevant organizations. (MES)

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Freeing access to women's information: an overview

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Abstract

As major gatekeepers of knowledge and culture, libraries and their decisions regarding which materials to acquire, which to ignore, and on how to make their contents accessible through cataloging and classification, codify knowledge. By virtue of such decisions, libraries have essentially controlled access to, and imposed a structure and relational value system on, all forms of information.

A wide range of difficulties has hampered access to information about, by and of particular concern to females of all ages. In recent years, librarians all across the globe have ororganized to modify existing practices in libraries and documentation centers. They are working with national and international government and grassroots agencies to make information about women and girls more easily available so that public policies can be better informed on issues that disproportionately affect females.
Previously, many countries did not even compile statistics on social, political, and economic indicators on females. Any national statistics kept were not disaggregated by sex. As a result, public policy was crafted to coincide with beliefs rather than facts.

This paper gives an overview of activities undertaken by librarians and other information professionals worldwide over the past decade or so and currently. An impressive variety of agencies either specialize in women's information entirely or have specialized units within larger institutions that make information about women's and gender issues accessible, in paper and all

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electronic formats from the Internet to video and sound recordings to specialized discrete databases.

Paper

The "Second Wave" women's movement that began in Western countries in the late 1960s spawned a generation of feminist scholars in institutions of higher education who challenged long-held assumptions about content and methods in traditional disciplines. These challenges continue in all parts of the world. Until the late 1960s most of the knowledge in contemporary civilizations had been produced by men, from a perspective that either excluded females or classified females as deviant. Called Women's Studies, the new field these scholars founded took as its purposes to enable women to become authorities on their own lives; to construct their own knowledge about women according to their criteria as women; and to empower themselves through knowledge making (Kramarae and Spender, 1992).

During the same time the new field was taking root, the United Nations declared 1975 to be The International Year of the Woman, with a convening conference in Mexico City. One of the major lessons women scholars and activists (frequently the same individuals) learned through the Mexico City experience and subsequent meetings was that the amount of government information on women was appallingly paltry. Some countries did not then keep many statistics on life indicators. Among those that did, very few statistics were disaggregated by sex. This meant that, for instance, examining crime statistics, it was not possible to distinguish between sex of perpetrators and the sex of victims.

While I realize that not all information about women is necessarily considered by some to be women's studies, for this paper I will use the terms "women's information" and "women's studies information" interchangeably.

Because, historically speaking, Women's Studies (WS) as a field is such a recent phenomenon that crosses nearly all disciplinary lines and refuses to separate the scholarly from personal experience, traditional libraries are still responding to the field in a variety of ways. Concomitant with the growth of WS is the increased general concern for gender issues due to the women's movement internationally. Libraries and women's groups the world over are attempting to provide both scholarly and "survival" information on women's and gender issues.

Access issues

Although many materials that preserve women's history and accomplishments have been held in libraries and archives for many years, they have not necessarily been organized in ways that provide good access to them.

Libraries serve as major gatekeepers of knowledge and culture. As Sarah Pritchard observes, in effect, library decisions on which materials to acquire, which to ignore, and on how to make their contents accessible through cataloging and classification, codify knowledge. By virtue of such decisions, libraries essentially control access to, and impose a structure and relational value system on, all forms of information (Moseley, 1995).

Traditional cataloging and classification practices have been biased and judgmental. A majority of libraries organize their collections according to various classification schemes that assume a universality of experience that is male-centered. Terminology used in most library systems for finding information is usually also based on male-centred language as well. That is, too frequently sexist terms are still employed to express specific concepts.

Pioneering work by Joan Marshall and a group of feminist librarians in the United States in the 1970s led to many improvements in Library of Congress terminology, such as changing the heading from the generic "Woman" to "Women". In spite of these improvements and the continuing work of reformers such as Sanford Berman, the scheme continues to perpetuate the use of numerous indefensible headings concerning women, people of color, older persons, sexual minorities, poor people, and disabled people (Berman, 1993).

Many libraries use improved terminology for recent publications. However, the high cost of reassigning subject headings to older works cataloged before improvements were made still keeps a substantial portion of library materials by, about and of concern to women inaccessible.

In addition to these difficulties, traditional libraries too frequently do not make full use of improved terminology that is available and do not assign enough subject headings to books being cataloged. This practice renders important aspects of many books and other materials invisible.

In most traditional library collections, the use of approved controlled vocabularies in providing access to information about, by and of concern to women too frequently presents difficulties of primarily four types. One difficulty is subsuming terminology (i.e., using the heading "Man" to mean all human beings). A second problem is the modifier tactic (e.g, "Women as artists") as if women were not ordinarily capable or otherwise qualified to be artists. (This also strongly implies the stereotype that women's rightful place is in the home as nurturer.) (Berman, 1993).

Separate and unequal treatment of specific groups of people is a third problem that occurs through the use of words or constructions connoting inferiority or peculiarity. An example was the now defunct heading "Woman-Social and moral questions" while there was no parallel heading "Man-Social and moral questions". (Marshall, 1977)

The fourth and last major problem is complete omission of terminology particularly of interest or concern to those researching women and gender issues, such as "Gynocide", "Sex tourism", or "Feminist humor".

Clearly the problems of sexism in language and in subject terminology schemes are not limited to the English language, as demonstrated by the fact that feminist librarians and archivists in several countries have produced a number of thesauri to reflect the central concerns of those seeking information relevant to women and women's studies. The Women's Thesaurus was published in the United States in 1987. At approximately the same time the National Women's Education Centre in Japan published Thesaurus on Women and the Family. Women in Development Thesaurus, a joint project of the Indonesian Institute of Science and UNICEF, was published in 1991. The International Archives of the Women's Movement (IIAV) in Amsterdam published a thesaurus, Vrouwenthesaurus, in 1993. In Germany, FrauenMediaTurm published Feministischer Thesaurus in 1994. More recently, in 1998 a joint project between IIAV RoSa Documentioncentre in Brussels, the Nordic Institute for

Women's Studies and Gender Research in Oslo, KVINFO (the National Danish Women's Library) in Copenhagen, and the National Italian Women's Library in Bologna culminated in publication of the European Women's Thesaurus, an English-language translation and adaptation of the earlier IIAV work. In addition, currently there are thesaurus projects in progress in at least Austria, Spain, Italy, and South Africa.

Some grass roots groups have not only compiled their own thesauri of terms but have also established their own classification schemes of call numbers for organizing their collections.

In addition to terminology and classification schemes that do not meet needs for information on women and gender issues effectively, library researchers are faced with the fact that very few reference works such as bibliographies, biographical directories or guides existed until approximately twenty-five years ago.

This means that, for the most part, until that time there was little guidance on which researchers or librarians could depend. What information there was on, for, or by women was scattered piecemeal throughout many individual resources generally based on the traditional disciplines.

Countries where libraries have existed the longest, such as India, Egypt, and China, began adopting Western models of organization and concepts of librarianship in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Libraries in some countries use adaptations of the Library of Congress Subject Headings scheme to provide subject access to their collections. Other countries, such as India and China, have their own national schemes of subject headings. In many countries, such as Japan, the use of subject headings is not a common practice at all.

Women's Information in libraries

Currently, the best resources for women's information are found in a variety of libraries, documentation centres, and archives in different countries. In some countries, such as Japan, the strongest resources for women's information are not in university libraries but in special libraries in many women's centres funded by city governments. In other countries the national government or a supra-national organization affiliated with the United Nations (e.g., UNESCO) funds the best resources for women's information, again as special libraries or documentation centres, either in women's centres or as independent entities.

According to a survey by Marieke Kramer and Jytte Larsen (Kramer, 1995), in Europe, for the most part, three types of centres of information for the study of women and gender issues exist. The first group developed as a result of the first wave of twentieth-century feminism in the 1930s. They are professional, publicly funded, large general collections. These include the International Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV in Amsterdam), Fawcett Library (London), and Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (Paris).

Second is the group of centres that were established as a consequence of the "second wave" of feminism in the 1970s. These collections tend to specialize by subject and are well-suited for networking but usually depend on volunteers to maintain them because of funding scarcities.

Thirdly, there are those set up within public bodies and organizations (such as national organizations for equality policy) in the 1980s. These were planned from the start to have professional paid staff, are computerized, and function as national information centres.

Some centres, such as KVINFO (Copenhagen) and ARIADNE (Vienna), originated in their countries' national libraries. Others began by being affiliated with WS units of universities. The degree of professionalism in these centres is high, as is the degree of coverage of national publications.

Librarians in European Union countries and in non-member states such as Czechoslovakia are working hard to organize the collection and exchange of information on women and gender issues. One fairly recent development is the establishment of the Women's Library and Information Centre in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1990.

In Asia, India has the most WS programs and research facilities. Information on women and gender issues is found in special collections in academic libraries, collections in government agencies, and documentation centres in WS research centres and cells in women's organizations. Perhaps best known internationally is the Research Centre for Women's Studies Documentation Center at SNDT Women's University in Bombay.

More recently, a substantial number of online networks has been established throughout Southeast Asia. The largest women's research institute in the world is the Korean Women's Development Institute in Seoul, established by the Korean National Assembly in 1982. Among its divisions is an Information Centre that supports Institute research projects and action-oriented programs.

In the Middle East, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, founded in 1973, is housed at the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College). The university library includes the Women's Documentation Centre, which has books and international periodicals.

Latin American women's groups have taken the lead in the use of electronic networks and communication systems to meet their information needs. (Women's groups in several Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have built information systems for themselves that are patterned after Latin American systems.) In Latin America, one of the best repositories of information on women is Isis Internacional in Santiago, Chile. Like many women's information centres in all parts of the world, Isis Internacional is a non-governmental organization (NGO) affiliated with the United Nations that seeks to provide needed information that is produced by or for women or is on topics of concern to women. Isis particularly serves women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

It appears that in most Latin American countries scholarly information for WS is best accessed through feminist groups such as the Centro de Investigación y Capacitación a La Mujer in Quito, Ecuador, or CIDHAL (Communication, Exchange, and Human Development in Latin America) Women's Centre in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In some countries, such as Brazil, scholarly productivity is very recent and resources scarce. Frequently the best access to information on women and gender issues is through private libraries.

In 1997, the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, hosted a pan-African workshop for librarians and documentalists with the aim of exploring ways to share gender information and resources throughout

Africa. One result of that workshop is the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN),which has established an electronic network. The GAIN network enables libraries of many women's groups such as the African Centre for Women in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, an NGO affiliated with the United Nations, to share resources and improve the flow of information with other entities such as the Women's Research and Documentation Project at the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania.

Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) in Kampala, Uganda, is an activist women's resource centre. One of its goals is to collect and disseminate information related to women and to facilitate communication and networking between individuals and women's groups from different parts of the world. Its documentation centre works with contacts in at least 154 countries.

Collection development issues

An inherent part of women's studies is the fact that many of its source materials are generated by activist groups. The standard practice in most libraries not to collect materials not easily available through the commercial trade effectively excludes books, journals, videotapes, etc. produced by small presses or enterprises unless someone in the library makes special efforts to acquire them. It is frequently the feminist presses, which are small by commercial standards, that publish the information most valuable to women's studies researchers. The same is true for videotapes, CD-ROMs, and information in other formats.

In most libraries, responsibility for selecting materials to add to the collection is divided up by traditional subjects. Most academic libraries do not have WS specialists per se. Because women's studies involves so many different disciplines, careful coordination of effort among various selectors is required in order to develop a good collection in WS. In recent years increasing numbers of academic libraries are designating one person to have formal responsibility for building the collection in this area (usually along with responsibility for other areas as well).

Women's Studies librarianship

Women's studies courses began in the United States in the late 1960s and spread from there. WS librarianship began there also, in response to the new scholarship on women in both courses and research. The American Library Association has a Women's Studies Section that began meeting in 1979. One of its goals is to promote awareness of WS as a multi-disciplinary field of research and teaching that libraries must respond to.

Several projects initiated by the Section and its members have led to the publication of valuable resources in the form of directories, indexes, bibliographies and more. Another project has influenced producers of standard indexing services and databases to include more WS periodicals - thereby improving access to information vital to anyone interested in women and gender issues.

One aim of the International Federation of Library Associations Round Table on Women's Issues is to promote awareness of women's issues in libraries. This

entails gathering and disseminating information about women in the profession of librarianship and surveying available information resources on women and their organization and use.

Progress and Prospects

In 1998 the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) in Amsterdam hosted an international conference for librarians and documentalists working with materials relevant to women and gender issues. The "Know How Conference" attracted approximately 300 information specialists and representatives of government agencies from over 80 countries. Presenters highlighted their projects and activities employing cyberspace as well as other means. Topics covered included, among others, indexing women's information on Internet; designing new online resources; cataloging and classification issues in handling women's information; and empowering women's information for women in rural, immigrant, and minority communities.

An impressive product that came from the above conference is an online guide to collections of women's information in all types of organizations everywhere, entitled "Mapping the World of Women's Information". This guide, a continuing service of IIAV, provides keyword and geographic access to collections literally worldwide.

Sarah Pritchard points out that librarianship is concerned with understanding the nature of information and recorded expression, the ways people seek and use it, and the best structures and processes for organizing, documenting, preserving, and sharing it. Feminist thought questions the nature of knowledge itself. Consequently it also questions the very structures and institutions built around our concepts of what knowledge is.

Libraries and librarians must continue to meet the challenges of WS as we decide what to make available (through print, electronic, or other formats), how to make it available, and what to preserve. Libraries need to mobilize resources to enable writers, librarians, publishers, faculty, students, policy-makers and women in the community to find information and to use it to create new services and structures in society. (Moseley, 1995). (Witness the increased public awareness and changed policies in many countries vis a vis issues such as women's legal rights or violence against women that have grown over the past 25 years, thanks in large part to the women's movement.)

We have touched on only a few of the current efforts to free access to women's information. Members of the global community of women's information specialists continue to make a difference through participation in local, national, and international activities such as the Beijing +5 meetings, progressing toward the goal Pritchard articulates.

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Addresses of Organizations African Centre for Women

United Nations Economics Commission for Africa
Box 3001, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

African Gender Institute
URL: http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi ARIADNE

Kooperationsstelle Frauenspezifische Österreichische Nationalbibliothek
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CIDHAL Communication, Exchange, and Human Development in Latin America)
Cuernavaca, Apartado Postal 579, Morelos, Mexico

Fawcett Library: The National Women's Library, London Guildhall University
Calcutta House, Old Castle Street, E1 7NT London, United Kingdom
URL: http://www.lgu.ac.uk/fawcett/main.htm

Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University
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